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What if we stopped speaking negatively and instead used words of kindness?

By Elizabeth Santiago
UCF Forum columnist
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Children usually begin speaking their first words about 11 or 12 months old. From “mama” and “dada” come more complex words and thoughts.

These infants begin to take in the outside world and make it their own with each new experience. With those new experiences and growth come a perspective on the world and the ability to share it. We learn our methods of communication quickly, but how many of us truly understand the impact our words have?

Words have the power to console those in grief, uplift the downhearted, and inspire those who feel defeated. History shows us how influential speeches are to groundbreaking movements and changes. It’s hard to imagine where we would be without Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream...” speech, or Ronald Regan’s speech calling for Russia to tear down the Berlin Wall.

Although best as a positive influence, words can also lead to painful ramifications. Through his persuasive techniques, Hitler managed to persuade numerous countries to kill more than 6 million innocent people just because of their religion. What started out as a way to communicate to survive, has the capability of being the vessel in which hate and destruction flow through.

At a young age, I experienced how hurtful words could be. When I was bullied at school, my mom incessantly recited “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” as a form of comfort. As bad as I wanted that phrase to be true, life had taught me a lesson that I could not ignore.

I learned that the pen is truly mightier than the sword. The impact of words has the ability of molding the lives of others. For example, my mother was constantly ridiculed for her Hispanic accent while speaking English. Hollywood hadn't glamorized the way Latinos spoke English yet, so this proved to be a traumatic experience for her. This, in turn, caused her to emphasize English over Spanish when raising her children. Having a limited grasp of Spanish, however, caused me to struggle with my identity as a Latin American woman.

Though mightier than the sword indeed, the pen shares the double-edged blade characteristic with its counterpart. It is for that reason we must be cognizant of what we say and how we say it.

With the tragic events that have taken place recently around the world, we have seen the power of our words at work. We have witnessed vile words turn into actions of hate, only to leave us with an unbearable loss. We can put an end to this; we *must* put an end to this.

In theory the answer is simple, but the answer is far more complex in practice. What if we listen to others and learn to communicate? What if we promote and invest in love as much as we do our businesses, companies, and sources of income? What if, we stop ourselves from speaking negatively and instead speak words of encouragement and kindness?

It is easier to refrain from something when it is not actively portrayed in our society. In these past couple weeks, I have made it my mission to spread positivity in any way I can. Whether it is making small talk in a waiting room, smiling to those who cross paths with me on the way to work, or even voicing my appreciation, I have noticed that the attitude becomes infectious.

It's amazing that after learning how to convey our thoughts and emotions as we age, we don't do it nearly as much as we should. In fact, I challenge everyone reading this to do a random act of kindness or genuinely vocalize their appreciation for someone today.

As Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Have the strength to speak your mind, the wisdom to know when to hold your tongue, and the compassion to love continuously.

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